

THAT MUDDLE.

How Long Will It Take to Undo the Work of Thirty Years?

EDITOR ADVOCATE:—Perhaps muddle is the proper term. Such expressions as squeeze, compress, stringency in money matters, crises, and panics do well enough to convey an idea of certain aspects and stages. "Muddle" is the only term broad enough to cover the whole condition in all its aspects, and at all points of its development. But it is the thing itself, rather than the name applied to it, that the people just now are wrestling with, for it is being unanimously conceded that whatever it may be called, the thing itself is becoming just a little monotonous. It is not infrequently asked, "When will the muddle give over and things return to normal conditions?" And generally it is replied that it is only a question of a short time; that the country has passed through such crises before and never persisted a great while; and we are usually advised to have confidence ourselves and encourage it in others, for all we need now is faith. But is anyone quite sure that this crisis is like any other the country has ever experienced, and is it likely to have the same speedy ending? Again, is it a fit subject of faith cure, or must more substantial remedies be applied? Those other crises were generally of rather superficial character, limited to certain location, and confined, for the most part, in their origin, duration and disasters to the upper stratas of business society, or to what is sometimes called the exploiting classes. Perhaps it was only a temporary disturbance in money distribution; too much at one point, too little at another, to meet the demands of business. In such case the equilibrium is speedily restored. Or perchance the panic was the result of reckless speculation and wild-cat enterprises based on borrowed capital. These speculators and enterprises go down, dragging down banks and others too heavily involved with them. A temporary panic follows. But it is soon discovered that the only unstable institutions have already disappeared, and the stable world soon moves on as usual and as if nothing had happened. But has our present muddle such superficial, local and confined base? Is not the patient's disease more deep seated, and does it not pervade the entire system? Will not, therefore, the convalescence be less speedy?

Human interests are so linked together, and so mutually interdependent that "circle of human affairs" is not a less-appropriate expression than "circle of human knowledge." As in the discussion of any subject within human knowledge it is necessary to cut the circle at some point, so in the discussion of human affairs it is necessary to cut the circle somewhere. And in both cases the writer finds that, cut the circle where he may, his first say hinges on something that has gone before. In the present case we cut the circle of human affairs at the farmer; that is, we base the present general muddle on an antecedent muddle which the farmer was enjoying all unto himself before the muddle became apparent to the upper stratas of business society, or in any wise affected them. What antecedent conditions led up to the farmers' muddle is a question not just now pertinent to our inquiry, for it is beyond the point where we cut the circle. Perchance that antecedent cause was the fact that for thirty years the government has been run in the interests of the upper stratas and against the interests of the farmer in all cases

where there was antagonism of interests. Perchance it was in part due to the tariff with its steady drain from the farmer class and sections to the protected interests and sections. Perchance the gold standard had something to do with it, thus giving money the power to command what circulating medium is allowed us, making money exceeding shy when most sorely needed to move the farmer's crop. Perchance a cause of a different nature was the farmer's own extravagance, lack of judgment in the choice and culture of crops, and especially the lack of a business system and concert of action in the disposal of crops, thus putting them at the mercy of the upper stratas. Perchance the whole goose that ultimately broke the camel's back was the fact that by the aid of government the money power became so great in a few men's hands that by resorting to combines, trusts, monopolies and all that, they were able to defeat the operation of the law of supply and demand, thus causing the farmer and planter to get less for what they sold and to pay more for what they bought than would have obtained under normal conditions. But be the antecedent causes what they may, the farmers and planters of the country have for quite a while been reasonably well aware of the fact that they were doing no good, that they were making no money, accumulating no property, and getting more hopelessly in debt from year to year. They were thus getting in a muddle long before the upper stratas recognized any indications of a muddle, for the farmers' muddle had not yet affected them. True, the farmers cried out, through the Grange, the Alliance, and the third party, "Men and brethren, a crisis is on us, what shall we do to be saved?" But the upper stratas paid little attention except to laugh at the farmer as a hayseed and mossback, and to condemn him as a calamity shrieker. Indeed the farmer was told to shut up his head, not to tear his gown, that he was all right, that his troubles were all imaginary, that he was doing as well as any man could do and as well as any reasonable man ought to wish to do, that this was the most prosperous country in the world, and that if his affairs were getting a little mixed, the way out of his muddle was the most natural thing in the world—he must make more and spend less. Some told him to improve his way and make larger crops and more of them; some to not raise so much; that overproduction was the trouble, if trouble he had, which was exceedingly doubtful. But in no event was there a muddle, nor a crisis threatened, so long as the farmer kept it all to himself and did not allow it to affect in any way the upper stratas. This he was able to do for a time by borrowing money, selling off land and timber, running down his stock, and thus piecing out his crops with "collaterals" that had accumulated in more prosperous times.

But a time came when the available resources were disposed of, and the muddle which up to this time had been content with the farmer, began reaching out to a broader field and larger game. The farmer began to fail in the usual purchase of supplies and in the payment of debts to the retail merchant, and the retail merchant got a little "panic;" the retail merchant failing to pay and buy of the wholesale merchant, the wholesale men became some more "panic;" the wholesale merchant failing to pay and buy of the jobber, importer and manufac-

turer, they got panic; the manufacturer failed to buy of the mine owner and they both began reducing the output that couldn't be sold, and then quite a number of men were without employment. And all along the line they were failing to meet their notes at bank; the banks got panic, refusing to let out money and called in what was already out, upsetting some who operated on borrowed capital; some banks knocked under out of defiance to adverse conditions, the depositors got panic, withdrawing their deposits which placed other banks in the receiver's hands, thus adding fuel to the fire. Finally the thing struck Wall street affecting railroad stock and so on.

And thus what was only a modest cry of hard times with the farmer, to which no attention was paid, became a stentorian wail of panic as it progressed up the line, to which you must needs listen or stop your ears. What was only a small flag of distress on the farm became a whole bale of bunting thrown out in the manufacturing and commercial city. And it wasn't long about it, for while the farmer may stagger along under his load of debt, the man in the upper stratas must meet his liabilities promptly or topple over, going out of business or into the receiver's hands. Besides that, those upper stratas are abundantly heard from when anything hurts them, the great papers see to that, but the farmer is long suffering and reticent and the reporter does not intrude himself on his private affairs.

But a muddle like ours not only affects capital but labor as well. Low prices and small demand for the output implies lower wages and less demand for labor. Low wages does not seriously affect the laborer if food, clothing and shelter are correspondingly down. It is only when the demand and prices for the output on the farm, in the manufactory, or in the mine reaches a point where laborers are not wanted, that the muddle becomes a tangible thing to him, for then, if he has not somewhat laid up for a rainy day, it matters not to him that food, clothing and shelter are cheap, he can't get them all the same and must suffer and tramp. This again reacts on capital reducing the demand for the output, for in the business sense it matters not so much what a man wants and ought to have but what he is able to pay for.

Then it strikes us the muddle which just now affects the whole people so seriously is not just like those which heretofore the upper stratas indulged in. In those other panics, especially those that came on earlier in the history of the country, it was the upper stratas that suffered. The farmer scarcely perceived the storm raging elsewhere, for he was prosperous, able to pay his debts, and buy of the upper stratas thus aiding them in the matter of recuperation. But in the present muddle the farmer is not able to help himself. This muddle originated and for sometime had its duration exclusively with him, unperceived by the upper stratas. And when it comes to the matter of recuperation it is difficult to see just where it will begin unless in the lower strata where the trouble began. The farmer has long maintained, and with great truth, that all other prosperity must base on the farmer's prosperity, and if common sense fails to convince the upper strata of the truth of this position, possibly the history of the rise and progress of this muddle will aid them on to a rational conclusion. It ought require no great

stretch of imagination to realize that the farmer and miner not only furnish the materials which the upper stratas manipulate but that they also constitute the great body of consumers of the output of the manipulators. And it ought require no great talent to see that if those classes can't buy and pay for what they have bought, that the upper stratas can't expect to enjoy any great degree of prosperity. If the present muddle originated in an inability on the farmer's part to pay his debts and continue buying of the manipulators it must be plain enough that that ability must be restored to him, or he must restore it to himself, before the muddle can possibly give over.

It has always been looked on as rather a foolish thing in the man who killed the goose that laid the golden eggs. But if the goose be not yet quite dead, and it is a matter of picking the goose, the manipulator ought to be able to understand that having picked the goose bare, he must now wait until another crop of feathers is grown. And if the manipulator, banking on the feathers promised, and which it turns out are yet to be grown, has involved himself in the muddle, it is unfortunate, but we see no way out of the difficulty except to aid the goose in growing feathers. Of course it was wrong in the farmer to promise feathers that were not on his back or any where else in sight, but then the farmer had given the manipulator due notice through the Grange, Alliance, and third party that the stock of feathers was running low. He ought to have believed him in time. Possibly, looking from afar off, he mistook for feathers that which was only moss, but as he has always insisted that the farmer was a mossback and not a canvassback, we don't just see how he has been imposed upon.

The mill having come to a standstill, whether from lack of something in the hopper, or from shortage in the paying demand for the meal, when is it likely to start up again, or rather when will it be running with a full head of water and the usual output of bran? If the general muddle bases on the farmers' muddle, and if that bases on the tariff; on a money power operating through combines and monopolies; on adverse silver legislation making it possible for a few men to control the currency of the country and the prices of all commodities, and on the farmers' extravagance, lack of judgment in crops and culture, and of system and concert in disposing of crops, then it must strike us that these conditions must be reversed before we can even make a show of starting back up hill; otherwise we must needs go on down to the bottom and remain there until the bottom drops out. And if it has required thirty years under a government of adverse legislation to bring us to our present pass, is it likely we will get back to normal conditions in a day's time even under government more benign? F. J. RIPLEY.

Horne, Tennessee.

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